

## OUR VISION FOR QUALITY GROWTH

Across the country, Americans are talking about the pace of growth in their communities and the challenges associated with it. They are discussing how to manage future development, alleviate traffic congestion, prevent overcrowding in schools, preserve open space, and revitalize deteriorated urban and suburban neighborhoods. ***Building Better Communities: A Toolkit for Quality Growth*** is designed to help citizens, civic leaders, and elected officials identify effective, common-sense solutions that will work in their communities. The following introduction lays out what we call “Our Vision for Quality Growth.”

**Building Better Communities: A Toolkit for Quality Growth**

# OUR VISION FOR QUALITY GROWTH

Across the country, Americans are talking about the pace of growth in their communities and the challenges associated with it. They are discussing how to manage future development, alleviate traffic congestion, prevent overcrowding in schools, preserve open space, and revitalize deteriorated urban and suburban neighborhoods.

With rising prosperity during the last half of the 20th century, it is no wonder that the nation has witnessed an unprecedented increase in the number of Americans who own homes and an equally significant advance in the average citizen's personal mobility. Today, more than half the population lives in the suburbs, 40 percent of jobs are located in the suburbs and most workers commute from one suburb to another.

Since 1970, the U.S. population has increased by 32 percent, vehicle miles traveled is up by 131 percent, the number of licensed drivers climbed by 64 percent and the number of vehicles jumped 90 percent, according to the U.S. Census Bureau (1990) and the U.S. Department of Transportation. In contrast, national road mileage grew during the same period from 3,730,082 miles in 1970 to 3,944,601 in 1997—an increase of just 5.7 percent. Consequently, urban freeways are more congested than ever.

The movement of people and jobs from core cities to suburbs and the increased personal mobility afforded by automobiles has significantly improved the quality of life for millions of Americans. Yet, those changes also have created problems that many growing communities face today.

Decisions made about these issues will have a profound effect on the quality of life for future generations. While most Americans want effective, common sense solutions to the challenges related to economic and population growth, few

would support policies that limit individual choices about where to live and how to travel.

This document, *Building Better Communities: A Toolkit for Quality Growth*, is a toolkit divided in two sections that can help citizens, civic leaders, and elected officials identify effective, common-sense solutions that will work in their communities. Part One of the toolkit, called “Knowing the Facts” provides information on suburban development, traffic congestion, and other growth-related issues. Part Two, called “Building a *Quality Growth* Campaign,” provides suggestions on building a coalition of community supporters, developing appropriate information and materials to support coalition activities, getting the coalition actively involved in transportation planning, and delivering the message effectively to the media, public officials, and civic groups.

Five simple principles have guided the development of the *Quality Growth Toolkit*:

- Americans are and should remain free to choose where they live and how they travel, and public policies related to future growth should not limit those choices.
- Economic development and population growth confer benefits on communities if the challenges associated with them are properly managed.
- Citizens should have an opportunity to participate in decisions affecting future growth in their communities.
- Infrastructure investments should reflect public sentiment and needs, and transportation improvements should be aimed at improving road safety, in addition to accommodating, rather than stifling, projected growth in travel.

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- As our nation continues to grow, environmental improvement and economic development should complement each other to produce healthy, vibrant communities.

This toolkit provides information, talking points, and case studies on methods to relieve traffic congestion, preserve undeveloped space in neighborhoods, provide transportation facilities to accommodate residential and commercial growth, and improve air quality. It also provides a list of outside information resources on transportation issues and step-by-step instructions for developing a campaign to improve mobility in one's own growing community.

Quality growth means taking a balanced, sensible approach to solving a community's growth-related problems. A balanced approach means using all the tools at our disposal. Flexible work schedules and telecommuting would help relieve traffic congestion. Transit—including private transit such as vans that pick people up at home and drop them at their office door—can also make a difference. In addition, however, we need to explore ways to make the existing road system more efficient: synchronized traffic lights for smoother flowing traffic, reversible commuter lanes, and computerized systems to route traffic around congested areas. In areas where highway capacity has not kept pace with new business and housing development, we need to add lanes or build new roads to accommodate the increased traffic.

To preserve open space, local governments and private citizens should work together to set aside undeveloped land. Federal and state officials should ensure that tax policy, such as the estate tax, does not force farmers and landown-

ers to sell parcels of undeveloped property. Equally important, however, local zoning laws should take into account most Americans' desire to have their own open space in the form of a backyard or local playground.

Public officials should take into account local economic conditions, aesthetic values, and other quality-of-life issues when making land-use plans and developing zoning laws. Traditionally and appropriately, county planning commissions, city boards, and other local planning authorities have developed these laws; such entities should retain these responsibilities. Efforts to regulate the pace and geographic scope of development in a community should be tempered with an understanding of the effects that zoning restrictions may have on housing and commercial prices. It is important to ensure that future generations will be able to pursue the American dream of home ownership.

Our quality growth philosophy is the foundation for this toolkit and the basis for fostering more vibrant and healthy communities and building a better future. We hope this toolkit is helpful and supports local campaigns for greater mobility. Addressing the challenges of economic development and population growth is important. It will require a dialogue, community by community. Common sense, though, will lead public officials to solutions that can improve the quality of life for everyone.

#### Endnotes

U.S. Census Bureau. (1990). *1990 Census of Population and Housing*. Washington, D.C.

U.S. Department of Transportation. *American Travel Survey*. Washington, D.C.